



## Focus on users to increase the value of official statistics

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### Abstract

The benefits of official statistics for society are often evident but hard to measure, which may make investments in statistics less attractive to decision makers. Yet official statistics have been a success story for decades. Currently, tight budget constraints are imposed on many national statistical offices, despite the growing demand for statistics globally and challenges arising from an increasingly competitive information industry. Statistics are at a turning point. The need to measure the value of official statistics has become ever more evident. To maintain relevance, national statistical offices need to convincingly communicate their added value. This paper will describe these challenges and the possible ways forward in line with the recently finalised *UNECE Recommendations on promoting, measuring and communicating the value of official statistics*.

**Keywords:** value; official statistics; user focus; information industry; communication.

### 1. Introduction

Official statistics have had an enviable track record over the last few decades. Furthermore, in an information age, the provision of reliable and high quality data and information by national statistical offices and other producers of official statistics around the world is increasingly important to our economies and societies. But recently the status of official statistics has been challenged by other data source, big data, open data and even opinions that seem to be replacing facts in a *post truth* society.

The Conference of European Statisticians discussed these challenges already in April 2014, at a seminar on “What is the value of official statistics and how do we communicate that value?”. The Conference stated that the value of official statistics should be promoted as a global asset. In consequence, the Chief Statisticians established a UNECE Task Force<sup>1</sup> on the Value of Official Statistics. This paper refers to the Recommendations by the UNECE Task Force, and illustrates them further by discussing the results of the customer survey carried out in Ireland.

Statisticians are facing many challenges at the same time. We need to recognise the implications of technological and other developments, and the related opportunities and threats, including the following:

- Producers of official statistics are by no means the sole supplier of information. Indeed, the world is awash with data. There is a growing confusion between official statistics and less reliable data. This may give more weight to opinions and impressions. Official statistics need to stand out as a trustworthy source of information. This is also crucial for persuading respondents about the importance of replying to statistical surveys.
- Tightening budgets and public accountability have increased the pressure on NSOs to demonstrate how effectively they use public funds to meet information needs.
- The Digital and Data Revolutions also raise legitimate questions about how effectively NSOs are using these new possibilities to expand the benefits they provide to our societies.

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<sup>1</sup> The Task Force consisted of the United Kingdom (chair), Mexico (vice chair), Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, Switzerland, Turkey, Eurostat, OECD, PARIS21 and UNECE.

- Big Data presents challenges and opportunities. Every day, 2.5 quintillion bytes of data are created – so much that 90 per cent of the data in the world were created in the last two years. Proper use and correct analysis of the data is the key factor in making better decisions.
- Demand for statistics is rapidly increasing. The globalized world creates new information needs. As just one example, reporting on progress towards the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development will require hundreds of indicators to be produced in new partnerships.
- Users' needs are becoming more complex and individualized, and more detailed information is needed for instance on small population groups and geographic localities. Just as in other areas, the public legitimately demands that their needs for information can be met conveniently and easily, and asks for more tailored products that are easy to use.

It is not over-dramatic to conclude that official statistics are at a crossroads. There are also opportunities presented by these developments, which if we are wise, we will take in order to build on previous successes. But there are also threats. Failure to recognise these could find official statistics partly or largely replaced by other information and data providers.

We have to build on the [Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics](#), developed by the Conference of European Statisticians in 1991, as the cornerstone of the unique value of official statistics. We can enhance the value only by putting the customer truly at the centre of our work. This is the central recommendation of eight recommendations made by the UNECE Task Force. The recommendations contribute to improving customer experience and increasing the value of official statistics to society.

## 2. Whose needs should statisticians focus on?

One of the strongest motivations for producing official statistics is their usefulness for the functioning of democratic societies and evidence-based decision-making. Official statistics are of little value unless they provide the public with equal opportunities to access reliable information for their decisions.

Statistics need to be developed with users in mind. User needs differ depending on circumstances. Some users will not express their data needs, and some requests could be mal-intentioned. Statistical offices have a responsibility to consider the relevance of statistics to society and to the rights of its members.

**Figure 1. Users of official statistics and their data needs**



The UNECE Task Force analysed user segments to develop products and services that meet specific user needs. Figure 1 describes possible segments identified based on how detailed or aggregated their data needs are. The figure generalizes the user segments for illustrative purposes: the wider the box for the user segment, the more detailed are the data needs of those users.

To pinpoint specific user needs and address them, statistical offices may need to go deeper within the user segments to analyse customers' behaviour and expectations. Users can also be classified further into heavy users, light or occasional users and non-users.

Non-users merit explicit attention. They may not have any needs that official statistics could meet, but it is possible that the situation arises from the lack of availability of the statistics sought or from user

ignorance as to statistics that are available which would have value for them. Either way, statistical offices would be well advised to develop an understanding about non-use and to act accordingly.

### 3. The power of eight recommendations to increase user focus

The challenge is to demonstrate that official statistics continue to add a growing, unique value to users. To inspire statistical offices in this work, the UNECE Task Force made the following recommendations<sup>2</sup>:

1. **Exploit the comparative advantage of official statistics:** Official statistics are produced in professional independence based on scientific methods, rigorous quality criteria, including relevance, and the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. Upholding these principles is essential to any country seeking to understand itself and respect the rights of its members.
2. **Put customers truly at the centre:** We can improve the value of statistics only by putting the users truly at the centre. However expertly and professionally produced, official statistics are of no use unless they meet someone's needs. That requires understanding users and non-users, and their needs, and recognizing that these needs will not stand still. There is also a need to move away from bulk data provision towards higher value products. Users are looking for tailored answers rather than complex statistical tools. We cannot simply say "no" to new demands.
3. **Design statistics for everyday life:** Design is much more than logos and graphics – it is about keeping customers engaged by providing products and services that meet their needs. Private businesses integrate data into devices, apps and analytical tools in easy to use environments. Statistical data could be used in a similar way as part of people's daily lives. Users no longer want just the numbers but also the story that goes with them.
4. **Innovate to remain valuable:** The world is not standing still. Investment in innovation is, therefore, indispensable. Statisticians need to be more agile to keep up with changing user demands. Even though regular statistical production require time and resources, enough time should be allocated to thinking about how to unleash the potential of official statistics to improve lives.
5. **Go forward with strategic partners:** Statistical offices are experienced in working in partnership. But we should seek out new partnerships whenever these can offer strategic value. New forms of partnership internationally and with the private sector offer ways of tapping unexploited potential of new technologies and design, new products and better communication.
6. **Build the official statistics brand and gain visibility:** "Hiding our light under a bushel" is not a virtue. The value of official statistics need to be demonstrated better and more vigorously. We can realize the potential value that official statistics provide only if users recognize what we have to offer and turn to us to meet their needs. Statistical offices need to invest time and effort in outreach strategies, train staff and employ communication professionals.
7. **Measure outcomes to achieve greater impact:** The judge on the value of official statistics is whether they lead to better outcomes for our societies. Statistics should lead to decisions by governments, companies or people which are better informed. But, to date, statisticians have not been good at assessing and measuring such impact. This has hampered our ability to promote the value of statistics. The Task Force report suggests several approaches for measuring this value systematically.
8. **Share and learn to keep abreast of best practices:** The threats and opportunities facing official statistics are constantly changing. However successful we have been in the past, the future can be assured only by actively responding to changing circumstances.



<sup>2</sup> The full Task Force report is available here: [www.unece.org/statistics/statstos/task-force-on-the-value-of-official-statistics.html](http://www.unece.org/statistics/statstos/task-force-on-the-value-of-official-statistics.html)

#### 4. How to increase user focus in statistical offices?

There are many ways to increase customer focus, some require more investment than others. In the course of its work, the UNECE Task Force was struck by how many existing good practices could be identified in statistical offices or other industries but which were not widely known. It, therefore, constructed a [wiki on best practices](#) of statistical offices.

The wiki and the *Recommendations on promoting, measuring and communicating the value of official statistics* provide many ideas on how to increase customer focus and the value of official statistics. For instance, the review of practices in other industries in the private and public sectors revealed many useful practices, some of which could be applied to statistical offices.

In addition to more than 200 cases of best practices presented in the wiki, the UNECE Task Force created some concrete tools that can inspire statistical offices in their work:

- **Measurement framework** with objective and subjective indicators and methodologies for monetising the value of official statistics.
- **Generic user survey** with possible questions for national user surveys to measure users' views particularly on the value of official statistics.
- **Convincing arguments** on the value of official statistics that could be used in discussions with stakeholders and social media posting.



Next, the above tools will be tested in a number of countries, and then developed further. The Central Statistics Office of Ireland participated in the Task Force and tested many of the questions included in the generic user survey in their national user satisfaction survey. The user survey revealed interesting results that in many ways reflect the above recommendations.

#### 5. Customer sentiment on the value of official statistics in Ireland

Following on from the recommendations to *Put customers truly at the centre* and *Measure outcomes to achieve greater impact* the Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) agreed to pilot the generic user survey. An external organization, Coyne Research, was selected through a tender process to carry out the survey to encourage respondents to freely express their honest opinion.

The objective was to gain deeper insight into customer needs and usage for CSO products and services:

- To profile and understand CSO's customers current and potential needs
- To understand customers preferred channels to access CSO products and services
- To understand specific customer usage and behaviors of CSO products and services
- To evaluate customer attitudes towards CSO and CSO products and services

The starting point for the survey was the generic user survey questions that were adapted to the objective of this survey and practicalities of an online survey<sup>3</sup>. The survey focused on existing CSO customers with a total of 506 respondents: 291 invited respondents and 215 from a pop-up invitation on the CSO's website and CSO's Twitter. No quotas or weighting were applied in the sample selection.

The survey respondents were profiled by gender (58% male, 42% female), age (81% 35 and over), social class, regional location, frequency of use of CSO products and services and a self-declaration on level of statistical/data expertise. This facilitated analysis of the responses.

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<sup>3</sup> The survey can be viewed here: <http://na2se.voxco.com/se/Preview/>

Over half (53%) of the respondents had used CSO products and services in the last week. Again nearly half (47%) of the accesses were via the website. 77% of respondents were working fulltime, mostly in politics and public bodies (40%), in business and finance (19%), in education (15%) and in science, technology, engineering and construction (11%). The majority of respondents claimed to be in a managerial role (65%) and employed by an Irish, medium (20%) to large sized (48%) organisation. 93% of respondents rated themselves as comfortable in their ability to calculate, interpret and manipulate statistical data. CSO was most often (76%) used as the respondents source of statistical information.

The CSO website (79%) had the highest channel momentum. Despite high awareness and usage for email and phone, StatBank<sup>4</sup> (64%) had the second highest channel momentum score. Channel momentum is calculated as an average of all the conversion ratios achieved at each stage of the customer's journey from *awareness* of the channel, to *ever using* the channel, to the channel becoming the *most often used* option for the customer. Customers expressed high overall satisfaction rating with the website (85%) and StatBank (84%) channels.

Customers came to the CSO for a number of reasons, the most frequent being for academic (40%), business/market analysis (16%) or general work (15%). 83% of customers used a desktop to access CSO statistics, 63% accessing via laptop, 30% via mobile and 20% via tablet or iPad. The majority of customers became aware of the latest CSO statistics directly on the website (65%), with just over a third finding out in the press/newspaper (36%). Social media statistical awareness is low for each of the available channels (9% CSO Twitter, 3% CSO Facebook). For the most part, customers considered CSO statistics trustworthy (91%), free from political interference (91%), accurate (88%) and meeting their needs (82%). On the other hand, they were dissatisfied with CSO statistics being timely (18%), easy to find (17%) and up to date (17%). 73% of customers said CSO statistics informed a decision made.

Two thirds (68%) of customers were very likely to recommend the CSO on a net promoter score (NPS), 9% were detractors with CSO. 72% of customers claimed awareness of CSO work, 88% held the perception that the CSO contributes towards understanding wellbeing and life in Ireland. 94% of customers agreed that CSO provides valuable services and statistics, while only 53% of customers agreed the CSO was a progressive organisation and only 28% agreed the CSO was actively present in social media. Top suggestions for improvements were for providing more detail and a greater variety of statistics (22%) and making the CSO website and tables more customer friendly (18%).

The takeaways from the customer survey:

- A high incidence of the use of the CSO statistics amongst those who need statistics, with minimal evidence of lapsing behaviour indicates **positive customer retention rates**
- The wide range of user sectors in the survey indicates a **broad profile of CSO customers**
- The large proportion of customers at a senior level within organisations, and high incidence of using CSO statistics to make decisions, indicates the **importance placed on CSO statistics**
- The CSO is the most popular source amongst customers for statistics; however, it is important to note that it is **not the only source** customers are using for their statistical needs
- The wide range in reasons for using the CSO reflects the **diversity** of the available information
- With a significant proportion of customers accessing statistics through mobile devices it is important to ensure website and **online tools are optimised** for these devices
- As the majority only find out about new statistics once on the CSO website, there is potential to improve engagement and usage by **increasing communication** through other channels
- Overall, whilst customers were satisfied with their rating of CSO statistics, there is potential for improvements in terms of **timeliness of releases**, providing **clear signposting to statistics**, and ensuring the continuous improvement of the **visual appeal** of statistics on offer

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<sup>4</sup> Statbank is the CSO time series database: [www.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/statire/SelectTable/Omrade0.asp?Planguage=0](http://www.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/statire/SelectTable/Omrade0.asp?Planguage=0)

- There is potential to **improve ease of navigation** for customers by increasing the accuracy of the search tool, and reviewing the navigation process, e.g. dropdown menu summary
- CSO publications and releases are **highly rated**, with minimal evidence of dissatisfaction
- There are a **limited number of detractors** amongst CSO customers, indicating minimal threats to the CSO's reputation, but, it is important to maintain and seek opportunities to improve
- There is a **positive impression of the contribution of the CSO to Irish society** and a high claimed awareness of their activities. This again indicates a positive reputation
- There is an opportunity to **explore opportunities to improve the communication and visualisation** of statistics from a business/financial sector perspective
- The majority (60%) of customers did not have additional suggestions for improvement. Those who did, asked for a **greater variety of statistics and more user friendly website and tables**.

CSO is evaluating the feedback as an input into developing a comprehensive communication and dissemination strategy. Given the focus of this survey on existing customers, the CSO plans to commission a survey to understand the information needs of those who are not currently CSO customers.

## 6. Conclusion

The Irish survey shows impressive results in terms of the majority of customers agreeing that, among other strengths, the Central Statistical Office provides valuable services and statistics, contributes towards understanding of well-being and life in Ireland, has knowledgeable staff and helps to inform decisions, especially among government and businesses.

The results of the user survey in many ways confirm the recommendations on the value of official statistics. The above strengths are well in line with the experienced **comparative advantage** of official statistic, the unique value of statistics produced in professional independence based on scientific methods and rigorous quality criteria, including relevance to society.

The areas for further work arising from the Irish survey relate to **customer focus** and **design**. They confirm the need to present information in a visual and easily understandable way together with objective analysis providing context to numbers. This requires **innovation** along with the need to improve the presence of official statistics in social media and public debate. Improvement of statistical products and services will also require new strategic **partnerships**, as recommended earlier.

The results of the Irish survey show, as many other statistical user surveys, how frequent users of official statistics are more satisfied and, thus, more likely to recommend the statistical office. This underlines the importance of promoting the **brand** of official statistics and increasing statistical literacy.

Statisticians measure almost everything but their own value. The Irish experience shows that the **measurement** of this value, is useful for identifying focus areas for strategic development. Several countries have volunteered to pilot test the measurement of the value of official statistics using the generic user survey, dashboard of indicators and monetization methods.

It will be important to continue to **share experience** to stay abreast of latest developments – the wiki on best practices and regular UNECE meetings, for instance on the communication and dissemination, will provide platforms for sharing experience in promoting the value of official statistics.

While the UNECE Task Force has finalized its work, what happens next in national statistical offices makes the difference. User focus does not come without effort and many current practices need to be rethought. All statistical offices should take the agenda forward to ensure a strong role of official statistics into the future.